

A Good Home

Karin Lowachee | *Lightspeed Magazine*, 2016



I brought him home from the VA shelter and sat him in front of the window because the doctors said he liked that. The shelter had set him in safe mode for transport until I could voice activate him again, and recalibrate, but safe mode still allowed for base functions like walking, observation, and primary speech. He seemed to like the window because he blinked once. Their kind didn't blink ordinarily, and they never wept, so I always wondered where the sadness went. If you couldn't cry then it all turned inward.

The VA staff said he didn't talk and that was from the war. His model didn't allow for complete resetting or non-consensual dismantling; he was only five years old, so fell under the Autonomy legislation. The head engineer at the VA said the diagnostics didn't show any physical impairment, so his silence was self-imposed. The android psychologist worked with him for six months and deemed him non-violent and in need of a good home.

So here he was, at my home.

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My mother thought the adoption was crazy. We spoke over comm. I was in my kitchen,

she in her home office where she sold data bolts to underdeveloped countries. “You don’t know where they’ve been, Tawn,” she said. “And he’s a war model? Don’t they get flashbacks, go berserk, and kill you in your sleep?”

“You watch too much double-vee.”

“He must be in the shelter for a reason. If the government doesn’t want him and he’s not fit for industry, why would you want to take him on?”

I knew this would be futile, arguing against prejudice, but I said it anyway. “The VA needs people to adopt them or they have nowhere to go. We made them, they’re sentient, we have to be responsible for them. Just because he can’t fight anymore doesn’t mean he’s not worth something. Besides, it’s not like I just sign a contract and they hand him over. The doctors and engineers and everybody have to agree that I’d be a good owner. I went through dozens of interviews and so did he.”

“Didn’t you say he doesn’t talk? How did they interview him? How can you be sure he’s not violent?”

“They downloaded his experience files. They observed him, and I trust them. The VA takes care of these models.”

“Then let them take care of him.”

She knew less about the war than she did about me, her son, except that the war got in the way of her sales sometimes. Just like I’d gotten in the way of her potential as a lifestyle designer, and instead of living some perceived, deserved celebrity, she’d had to raise me. Sometimes I wondered if I harbored that thought more than she did, but then she kicked my rivets on things like this and not even the distance of a comm could hide her general disapproval at my existence.

Still, she was worried about the android killing me in my sleep. That might’ve been sincere. “The VA’s overcrowded. That’s why they allow for adoptions.”

Because she was losing the reasonable argument, she targeted something else. The fallback: my self-esteem. “Why would they think you’re a good owner? You can’t even afford to get your spine fixed. How are you going to support a traumatized war model?”

That was how she saw me—in need of fixing. “He can help me. I can help him.”

Even through a double-vee relay I felt her pity. And I saw it in her eyes. That seemed to be the only way she knew how to care about me.

I wasn't going to do that to him.

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"Mark." Saying his name in my voice brought him out of safe mode. He blinked but didn't turn away from the window. He didn't move. They'd said it would take a while. Maybe a long while. He'd been at An Loïc, Rally 9, and Pir Hul. The three deepest points of the war. Five years old but he'd seen the worst action. I wondered why none of the creators had anticipated trauma in them. So maybe they weren't as fully developed as humans could be; they were built to task. But they were also built with intelligence and

some capacity for emotional judgment because purely analytical and efficient judgment had made the first models into sociopaths. All of those had been put down (that they'd caught, anyway).

"Mark," I said, "my name's Tawn Altamirano." He knew that, they put it in his programming, but you introduced yourself to strangers. To people. "You feel free to look around my home. This is your home too. There's a power board in the office when you need it. You can come to me at any time if you need anything."

He didn't move or look at me. His eyes were black irises and they stared through the glass of the window, as if it could look back. Maybe he saw his own reflection, faint as it was. Maybe he wanted to wait until night when it would become clearer. Or maybe he just wanted to watch the maple tree sway, and the children walking by on the sidewalk on their way home from school.

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I had my routines pretty well established by now. Since my own discharge two years ago, and once the bulk of the physio was under my belt, I'd acclimated back home, got a job through the veterans program working net security for the local university. Despite what my mother said, I took care of myself. My war benefits allowed for some renovation of the bungalow—ramps and wide doorways and the like. When it was time for bed I left the chair beside it and levered myself onto the mattress. Some shifting later and I lay beneath the covers on my back, staring up at the ceiling. I didn't hear him in the living room at all. Eventually I called off the lights and darkness led me to sleep.

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I didn't know what woke me—maybe instinct. But I opened my eyes and a shadow stood in the doorway of my bedroom. For a second my heart stopped, then started up again at twice the pace until I saw that he didn't move, he wasn't going berserk, he wasn't preparing to kill me. Of course he wasn't. My mother didn't know the reality. Going to war didn't make you a murderer—it made you afraid.

His shape stood black against the moonlight behind him, what came through the living room window on the other end of the hall.

"Mark?"

He didn't answer.

"Mark, what's wrong?"

A foolish question, maybe, but he could parse that I meant right this second. Not the

generality of what was wrong. Not the implication of what was wrong with *him*. What had drawn him from the window and to the threshold of my room?

I pushed myself up on my elbows and opened my mouth to call up the lights. But he turned around and disappeared down the hallway, back toward the living room

and his standing post by the window.

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He was still there in the morning when I rolled through the living room on my way to the kitchen. As if he hadn't moved all night. Past his shoulders, in the early day outside, the children walked the opposite way now, some of them skipping on their way to school. A few of them held hands with their parents, mothers and fathers.

"Do you need a power up?" I said from in front of the fridge. To remind him that he had a board in the office. No answer. So I took out my eggs and toast and made myself some breakfast. I had to give him time; it always took time.

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A little after fifteen hundred hours when the schools let out, I got a knock on my front door. I was in the office so it took me a few seconds to get to the foyer, punch open the door, face the man and woman standing like missionaries on my porch. Behind them at the bottom of my driveway stood another man with three kids by his side. I looked up at the two directly in front of me.

"Can I help you?"

"Hello," the man said, looking down at me. To his credit, he didn't adopt the surprised and awkward mien of someone unused to confronting a person in a chair. If anything he seemed a little impatient. "My name's Arjan and this is Olivia. We were just wondering . . . well, we were a little concerned about your . . . the Mark model in your window."

I glanced behind me toward the living room, saw the back of his shoulders and the straight stance of his vigil.

"What about him?"

"He's creeping out our kids," said Olivia. "Twice they've gone by and he's just standing there. He's not a cat. What's wrong with him?"

If you had a double-vee, you knew about the Mark androids. Ten years ago, the reveal by the military had garnered a lot of press and criticism, but ultimately people preferred sending look-alike soldiers into battle rather than their own sons and daughters. All of the Marks looked the same, so they were easily identifiable; nobody could mistake them for human despite the indistinguishability of the cosmetics. The adoption program had garnered similar press and criticism; the VA had looked into my neighborhood before releasing Mark to me. We were supposed to be a tolerant, liberal piece of society here.

That was the theory, anyway.

"He's not doing anything, he just likes to look out the window."

"All day?" Olivia said.

"Have you been outside my house all day?" Because otherwise why would it bother

her if she only went by twice a day to pick up her kids, and that took all of two minutes? Arjan seemed more temperate, his impatience dissipated. "Just . . . perhaps if during

the hours when the children come and go from school, you sit him down somewhere else?"

"He won't hurt anybody."

"Can you, please?" Arjan gazed at me with some hint of that pity now. Not wanting to push in case I had a flashback or dumped my life story at his feet to explain why I didn't have the use of my legs.

Being a good neighbor meant picking your battles. Unlike what was happening in deep space and the war. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to try to coax Mark into another activity. "I'll see what I can do."

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I looked out the window with him for a minute, probably five. Slowly the kids faded away until no more of them traipsed by on the sidewalk. Cars drifted at suburban speed, quiet hums in irregular intervals that penetrated glass. From the look of the sky, we were going to get rain.

"I want to show you something, Mark." I blinked up at his impassive jawline, and above that the long dark lashes. They'd made them handsome, in a way. Not superstar plastic, but an earthy attractiveness. Gradation in the dark hair, some undertone of silver, as if life would ever age them. "Mark. Come with me." I touched his sleeve then began to push across the floor.

He followed—because I'd ordered him or because he wanted to, it was impossible to tell. Something had drawn him to my bedroom last night, so he was capable of operating on his own volition. I led him into the office and wheeled myself out of the way, near the couch. One wall braced a floor to ceiling bookshelf, with actual physical books stacked neatly row to row. My one ongoing possession of worth: my collection. They'd gone past the label of rare and become worthless. Nobody much cared for tangibles anymore, things you could hold in your hands that gave off a woody scent when the pages flipped.

None of the books were first editions or leatherbound. They weren't museum quality. But that was why I liked them—they were everyday, made to be handled without gloves.

"Maybe you can explore?" I pointed to the shelf. "There are some classics there. I know they don't download literature for you, but you can learn the old-fashioned way. If you want."

He stared at the colorful spines as if they meant nothing to him. Probably didn't. His head was full of strategy and tactics, and if any history existed in his brain matrices, it was related to war. They'd believed the data shouldn't be corrupted with frivolity: no poetry or plays or pop culture references.

But he wasn't in the war anymore. And he wasn't walking out of the room. This way, maybe, he wouldn't stand for hours in front of the window.

I left him in there.

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Through the double-vee, a calm, vaguely upper class male British voice explained how scientists were able to save the Bengal tiger from extinction eighty-five years ago through a combination of rewilding, genetic intervention, and ruthlessly wiping out poachers regardless of geographical borders. Rising quietly above the sounds of large cats huffing and animal protectionist gunfire, the low keen of something more human and distressed filtered past the sound panels and made me turn from the vee, toward the office.

The time on the wall said he'd been in there a little more than an hour. I should've checked sooner.

I found him in the corner, wedged between the bookshelf and the end of the desk. Sitting rigid with the eyeline of a house pet. I only wheeled in so far before stopping, careful to watch his eyes, but he wasn't looking at me. Some blank spot a meter in front of him held his attention. By his feet, splayed like a wounded bird, lay a trade-sized book, print side up. I couldn't see the title.

"Mark?"

This passed for crying on a face that couldn't shed tears. That sound, a wounded thing. "Mark."

I was so used to the reality of rain that hearing it now against the windows only drew

my attention because it drew his. His eyes widened and he put his hands in his hair. "It's okay." I rolled closer, slow. He stopped keening and somehow the silence was

worse. His elbows joined with knees until he was a black shard lodged between furniture. I stopped and picked up the book, turned it over.

For Whom the Bell Tolls.

The cover was some faded hue of purple and green, with an image of a shadowed soldier, a road, and a bridge. I'd read this book long ago, before my own war. I barely remembered it, but I remembered loving it. That must've been what it was like with people sometimes. Mark didn't look up, so I flipped the book over and read a random line on the page, where he'd either left off or where the book had opened when he'd tossed it. *Every one needs to talk to some one . . . Before we had religion and other nonsense. Now for every one there should be some one to whom one can speak frankly, for all the valor that one could have one becomes very alone.*

"We are not alone. We are all together," I recited to him from the book, a little like you'd speak scripture.

But he didn't look up and he didn't say a word. ••••

Eventually he returned to the window, but at night. The next morning the rain stopped and in an hour started up again. I needed to go shopping for groceries, preferred that to ordering them in, but struggling through the wet was a chore, so instead I set up a Scrabble board in the living room, on the coffee table. I shook the tiles in the velvet bag until I felt him look over. It was a gamble whether he'd be interested, but during breakfast I'd noticed the book on the windowsill in front of him. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

"Wanna play?" I shook the bag again.

It took a minute but he walked over and sat down on the couch across from me. If we played long enough he wouldn't be looking outside when the kids went home.

I explained the rules to him, knew I only had to say them once. He stared at the board and my hands and then stuck his hand into the bag and pulled his seven tiles, which he set on his tile bar precisely and carefully hidden from my eyes. He wouldn't speak but I thought at least this way he could make words.

I went first and lay down ATOMIC. I was a little proud of that.

He made TIGER.

I got ROUGE.

He made EQUINE. I said, "Good word!" Not like I was praising a dog, but because it

was interesting to see how he formed these words out of his programming. He won the first game but I was almost expecting that; it was like playing against a computer. It *was* playing against a computer. His vocabulary was ten times what mine was; I knew I was bound to lose when he began to use Latin. Not because his creators had programmed Latin for him, but because he understood the derivation of the language. He must have had that somewhere in his files.

As we were setting up the next game, my mother called. I talked to the house system, without visual. "I'm busy, call back later."

Mark stared at me. It could have been a dead kind of regard but as he rarely looked me in the eyes, I took it for inquiry. "My mother." That didn't make him bat a lash. "You play first."

Twenty minutes into the game his words grew shorter and shorter, barely gleaming six or eight points. His eyes remained lowered to the board. ONE. TO. ARE.

“Mark? Is something wrong?”

At night, before bed, I’d reviewed his downloads from the VA hospital, tried to find some string of code or something in the reports that the doctors might have missed. I wasn’t a doctor, I’d only been a rifle fighter, but maybe it took one soldier to understand another. His muteness was voluntary and I couldn’t forget that.

I looked at the spread on the board. The game didn’t matter. After sorting through the letters left in the bag and usurping a couple already displayed, I lay down some tiles separate from the game and turned the board toward him.

WORRIED.

He didn’t move, his hands on his knees. I watched his lids twitch as his eyes mapped the board. I made more words for him.

ABOUT YOU.

It took eight minutes for him to reach for the board. With the tips of both his forefingers, he slid the tiles around like a magician did cards on a tabletop. Then he swung the board back toward me.

SAD.

What could I say? I touched my legs. I saw his gaze follow that. Then I made more words too.

I KNOW.

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The shelter wanted reports from me and after the first week, they considered it a breakthrough. Never mind that Mark hadn’t said anything past that single word, Scrabble or otherwise. He just returned to his window. I went about my days with work, sometimes sitting on my bed with my system, sometimes in the office, and when he wouldn’t dislodge himself from his post, I sat on the couch and looked at his back. I scoured his files for clues. He didn’t play the game again but he carried that book with him when he powered up on the seventh day.

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“I wanted to check in,” my mother said. “See if you were still alive.”

This passed for humor in her world. Her face on my relay was cautious. Out of spite, maybe, I turned my system so the camera picked up Mark, standing by the window, a black arrow of false serenity with sun on his skin.

"What's he doing?" she said.

"Looking out the window."

"For what?"

I almost said "nothing." But it occurred to me that soldiers stood watch and this might

not have been a simple metaphor for his position.

"Enemies. So you better call before you come over."

This passed for humor in my world. She didn't laugh, but I did.

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The benefits of working from home meant I could take naps in the afternoon. Like a cat, I stretched myself onto the angle of sun that cut through my bedroom window, warm after days of rain, and shut my eyes, soaking up rays without fear of burning or UV—all house glass came treated.

The front door opening woke me up. I didn't hear it shut.

Either way, nobody should've been going in or out—unless it was Mark.

It took me two minutes to get myself in the chair and out to the door.

"Mark!" Out and

down the ramp, rapid, onto the sidewalk, look left, look right. Nothing.

"Mark!"

My vis tracked his location chip, all Mark models had them from the factory.

Deeply

embedded in their craniums. The dot on my optical display put him in transit, but at a speed that indicated running, not in a vehicle. At least. I rolled that way, past flat, cloned houses and uniform lawns, looking through the overlay across my vision until I spied the tall, black-clad figure in the park. The shadows on either side—other people—barely registered.

"Mark." I could shout, but with him now in my line of sight, startling could be worse. He stood facing the manufactured lake and people were pulling their kids away from him. Expecting a weapon or an explosion, who knew.

My hands burned. I hadn't worn gloves. Wheels bumped the edge of grass that led down an embankment to the carefully placed rocks, and further toward cold, cobalt water that lapped the shore. He'd been afraid of rain but he ran to water. If he'd been running to this place at all. Maybe he'd just run.

I wished for the Scrabble board, the only thing that had garnered a response from his broken programming. Instead I touched my red and callused hand to the edge of his as it hung at his side.

He twitched, that was all.

“Let’s walk?” An offer. I looked down at my legs. “So to speak.” Walk before someone called the cops, or a child screamed, or something propelled him to plunge into the lake where I couldn’t follow. Should he have decided to sink himself to the bottom of the lake, none of these people would likely try to stop him. “Walk with me, Mark. Please?”

I tried to wheel backward so I could turn around on the path that surrounded the lake. But before I made the full one-eighty, hands took hold behind my chair and pushed.

I let go of the wheel rims and rubbed my palms against my thighs. Looked up and back at his forward gaze. He gave me nothing but the direction of his stride and his acquiescence in silence. It was enough.

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We took walks twice a day now, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It hadn’t been my intention to cross paths with the schoolchildren, but those were the hours that made sense—before my work began and on a break before the last couple hours of my day—and they gave him some life to look at. Others in the neighborhood strolled with their dogs, but Mark walked with me. Sometimes he pushed the chair, but most of the time we went side by side. Sometimes I talked, idly gossiping about this neighbor or that, or noted the types of trees and flowers we passed. Information that he wouldn’t ordinarily possess because the places he’d been trained for in deep space hadn’t come with roses and Japanese maples.

More than once, Arjan or Olivia or somebody else from the neighborhood frowned at

us. The children were inquisitive, a few of them asking aloud as we passed where Mark had come from and what was wrong with him. “Aren’t they supposed to be in war?” The parents shushed them and pulled them away.

“He came home,” I told them. “He needed a family.”

I hoped that would get through to the adults, but they just smiled at me half-assed, as if I needed to apologize for the truth.

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I dreaded bad weather now. The night we had another thunderstorm I found Mark back in the corner of the library, making that tearless keening noise. I couldn't turn off the sky so I sat with him, lights on, talking softly. I picked up his Hemingway book from the floor and read to him. It seemed to calm him, having that focus. Maybe working out a plot, the drama and emotion of a fictional piece. The war in the book was so far removed from his own, yet truths existed across centuries when the common denominator was humanity.

Eventually, when my eyes grew weary sometime in the middle of the night, I closed the book and looked into his dark open gaze. His arms wrapped around his legs.

"Do you want to come into my room? You don't have to sit in the office all night—" Or stand at the window, "—but I think I need to lie down." I was really asking him if he wanted the company. Or asking him because I did. He didn't need to stand vigil at the window, through cloudy moonlight and racketing storm.

So he followed me to my bedroom. Helped me onto the bed without my asking. Even drew the covers up. I called off the lights and Mark, in silence, sat at the foot of my bed facing the door.

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In the morning he was gone—at least as far as the living room. I rolled out yawning and spied the Scrabble board on the coffee table, Mark sitting on one side. It made me smile. Taking initiative? I could picture the eager android psychologists ticking off their checklists, revisiting his memory files, trying to draw connections between Mark's habits here and his experiences in the war.

He felt no threat here, that was the difference. At least I hoped he didn't. Under observation and treated like a programmed computer back at the hospital, he must have still been wary. Who wouldn't?

I made scrambled eggs and toast and joined him at the table. He pulled the letter C and started first.

It wasn't for the game. He searched around in the bag until he found the letters he needed to spell.

LOST.

I looked at him, trying to determine the exact meaning. It was impossible to know. So I

reached for the velvet bag myself. HERE.

No question marks, I had only my eyes to ask it. He shook his head. Made another word.

COMPANY.

For a few moments I was confused. My company? But then—no. A company. *His* company. He was the survivor of a skirmish out at the Belt. None of the others had made it. The official report said ambush, but that had seemed scant even to me. Maybe some of the details had been redacted from his memory and thus what they'd given me, and he didn't even know anymore. But the body remembered. Maybe more of him remembered than all of the engineers and psychologists were willing to acknowledge.

I laid more tiles. HOW.

But he didn't say anything. Instead he just stared at the board then turned it toward me so I saw the question. And he looked at my legs.

Fair enough. "Shrapnel." I stretched my arm behind me. "My spine."

When he looked in my eyes, he didn't have to say a word. I saw that he understood. Some things technology couldn't fix—especially when you didn't have the means. Sometimes we injured ourselves, or we were injured, and the wounds stuck around. Like memories or the impact of them.

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Rather than standing at the window all night like an effigy, Mark took to staying in my room. Maybe he figured I'd need the help if I somehow flopped out of bed, or probably because he wasn't simple, he knew I liked the company. Years of sleeping alone, literally in a silent room without even the bodily noises of comrades in other bunks, and the isolation had become pungent. Over the days he and I established our own routine, not discussed because he still didn't talk beyond random words on the Scrabble board, and even then sometimes he didn't talk at all and just played the game.

The doctors said it was still progress. I didn't tell them about Mark sitting in my bedroom at night, but I did report that he began to bring me books from the office and liked me to read aloud to him. Sometimes he had no sense of timing about it. I'd be working and he'd just appear next to me and set down a novel on my lap. Classic war novels. *The Red Badge of Courage*. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. He wouldn't go away until I covered at least a chapter. I acted annoyed, but he knew I wasn't. Whether

that was through his ability to read human body language and gauge tone of voice, or more likely because he just knew me by now.

He still hated storms and we were deep into spring. It was the worst when one night the power went out.

The neighborhood outside fell to darkness. Inside, only the glow from my comp on its backup provided some illumination. The moon high outside the office window sat

obscured by rainclouds.

Mark darted from the living room where he often still stood watch, right into the office

where I was working. He didn't trip or crash into anything and I remembered his eyes had night vision capability. I didn't need to see his face to understand the plea.

"It's okay, the lights'll come back up soon." I rolled away from the desk and motioned out of the room. Tried to keep my voice casual, even if I could feel the tension dopplering out from his body in the dark. "Let's go hang out."

He loomed, near invisible in the shadows. He didn't even breathe and at least didn't keen anymore, didn't feel that level of pain at the upset. But his hand landed on my shoulder and clenched. Only his footfalls made sound as he followed me down the hall to the bedroom, which had become a refuge from all that scared him. A routine of safety.

I levered myself to the bed to sit and he climbed on beside me, legs and arms folded. Not quite with his back to the door or window, he never allowed that, but he eased into facing me at an angle at least.

And this was how we waited out the storm. ••••

Of course my mother had a key to my house; she'd insisted after I'd gotten out of the hospital, "just in case" living on my own in my "state" proved too difficult. Maybe I should've anticipated her worry. Every time she called she implied that Mark was a ticking bomb, so I just stopped answering her calls. Maybe she was in the neighborhood or maybe she did get in her car to drive a half hour to check if I was alive. Either way, through the storm she arrived and through the storm Mark heard her before I did.

We sat in the near-dark and I was reading to him from the light of my comm. "'He saw that to be firm soldiers they must go forward. It would be death to stay in the present place . . .'" And at that exact moment Mark launched off the bed and out the door with the precision of a guided missile.

I was fumbling for my chair, images in my mind of fang-toothed, angry neighbors storming my front door with pitchforks, when my mother's shriek penetrated every surface between the foyer and my bedroom.

"Mark!" Ass in the seat, hands on the wheels. "Mark!" I rolled out to see my mother face down on the floor, arms triangled behind her back, wrists caught in the vise of Mark's one-handed grip. "Stand down, soldier."

"Get him off me, Tawn! Get this crazy fu—"

"Shut *up*, Mom!" I stopped close enough to touch Mark's arm. Beneath his sleeve felt like iron. I kept my voice quiet because I couldn't see his eyes in the dark: "It's okay. It's my mother. It's okay." I repeated it until he let her go and stepped back near to the wall. Becoming motionless.

"Mom."

"He's crazy! What did I tell you!"

"Mom, tone it *down*." I didn't offer to help her up. She wouldn't have accepted it.

She propelled herself to her feet in a pitch and yaw. "Look what he did to my wrists!" She stuck her hands toward me. In the cracks of lightning and illumination, I saw vague shadows. Maybe bruises.

"You're all right, you're fine. Come sit down. You should've rung the doorbell, he thought you were breaking in."

"I have a key!"

"I told you to call ahead."

"My own son!"

I went to Mark and held his sleeve. "Come over here, man." My mother wasn't

listening; she could stand by the door and bleat until it passed.

Mark followed me to the living room where I hoped he would sit, but instead he went

to the window, his post, and stared out. He didn't have to breathe and he didn't say a word, but I knew the entire ruckus unnerved him. There was no other word for it. It reverbed through my body.

"Is that what he does all day?" my mother demanded behind me. "Can you at least lower your voice? You aren't helping."

"*I'm* not helping!"

"MOM."

We both stopped. Mark had turned around, now with his back to the window. His body blotted out what light came in from the street, creating a vacuum in my vision. So he could face us dead on. It was like the stare of a sarcophagus.

My mother turned her back to him. "I'm worried for you, Tawn." "You don't have to be."

"This isn't normal. Look at him!"

"He's fine. We're fine. We—"

But she wasn't listening. She began to walk around, feeling her way through the dark toward the office. Or my bedroom. It was so sudden when the lights flickered on and held that I had to blink spots from my vision. And in those moments Mark disappeared.

After her.

"Mark!"

I couldn't roll fast enough. I recognized his mode. Full protection, decisive defense.

What he'd been built for. I wanted to hold him back but this was his nature. He wasn't the one unnerved, he wasn't the one concerned for himself. It was *my* voice he heard, that his programming responded to. My voice and its irritation and tension and impatience.

In the seconds it took me to get from the living room to my bedroom where my mother had gone, I saw it ahead of me. In the span of his back and the straightness of his spine. In the precise way he seized my mother before she could set hands on my possessions. He spun her around.

She struck him. Reflex or intent, I didn't know. Of course it didn't affect him at all, didn't even bruise him. He didn't flinch.

Instead he dragged her to my window, opened it, and pitched her out. ••••

Luckily my house was a bungalow.

She said she'd wanted to pack me a bag and take me away from any danger. That if she did that for me I couldn't protest and would've been forced to go with her and ditch this mad idea of taking care of a military model. She had never understood that we wanted to take care of ourselves.

She didn't understand—when the VA engineers came to take him away—that he was my company and I was his.

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In the hospital they ran more tests on him. It was procedure because she'd filed a complaint. I gave my own statement: that he'd felt I was threatened, that he'd only been defending me, that my mother was crazy in her own right (I reworded that part a little). She'd disregarded my words and his existence. If I restricted her access to me or she learned to interact better, there would be no more problems.

And, yes, I wanted him home again. He belonged there—where I could read to him, where we could play games, and where he might one day be able to speak to me. He'd made a place beside me and at my window. He'd learned my routines and created ones of his own. He wanted to know all the books on my shelves. He liked walking in the sun.

He protected me. I wouldn't strip that from him.

They let me see him once while he was in the hospital. He lay on a stiff bed with transparent monitoring tape stuck to his temples. Little dots of glowing blue and red on the tape winked at me while his dark eyes stared blinkless, asking no questions.

I touched his arm. His skin felt cold. Human warmth didn't course through his veins. He didn't even have veins. None of it mattered. "Mark. Hey man, don't worry."

His head tilted, eyes met mine.

I gripped his hand. After a moment his fingers curled around mine, just as strong. Even stronger. I said, "The storm's gone and you're coming home."

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The children were walking on their way to school when we pulled up to the drive. It was a warm day, the kind where you wore light open jackets and began to roll up your sleeves in anticipation of summer. With the car windows down we heard their voices all the way to the school, to the yard. They sounded as colorful as their clothes and seemed to carouse right through the leaves to where we sat.

He hadn't said a word on the ride, only looked out the window. The parents passing behind on the sidewalk noticed us there; I spied the glances on the rearcam of the car. A

couple of them paused as if debating whether to approach, to ask why we were just sitting on my own driveway doing nothing.

But they didn't approach and I looked at Mark's profile. "You know . . . people are going to be like my mother. Like the neighbors. That's just the way it is until they get used to us." Not just him, but us.

I'd learned not to expect conversation but he did make contact in his own way. No Scrabble board lay between us but he turned his hands palm up and open. He looked at me.

What answer could I give him? That people were afraid, or lazy, or just plain ignorant? Who could we blame? The government, the military, the doctors and engineers?

We were both on probation. Mark, so he wouldn't injure somebody. And me, so I wouldn't let him.

"Where do you think this will lead?" my mother had asked. "You rehabilitate him or whatever they want to call it, and then what?"

Somehow it was impossible for her to understand. "Then he'll choose," was all I'd said.

Maybe one day he'd discover what had happened to his unit. Maybe I would help him. Or maybe we'd leave it alone because some memories were best left in the dark.

Before we went inside the house I caught his attention again, touched his shoulder. "The doctors say you're capable of speaking but you just choose not to. Sometimes that happens with people—"

"I am people," he said. His voice was lighter than I thought it would be, if hoarse from disuse. He was looking back out the window again. The sidewalk stretched clear now. "I am a person," he said to the glass. To the outside world.

They had created him to task but with the capacity for emotion. He was perfectly vulnerable, just enough, even for war.

When he slid from the car to head into the house, eventually I followed him, calling the chair from the back of the car to lever myself into it. I rolled up the ramp to the front door, where Mark stood, holding it open for me even though he didn't have to.

It was just the human thing to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Lowachee was born in South America, grew up in Canada, and worked in the Arctic. Her first novel, *Warchild*, won the 2001 Warner Aspect First Novel Contest. Both *Warchild* (2002) and her third novel, *Cagebird* (2005), were finalists for the Philip K. Dick Award. *Cagebird* won the Prix Aurora Award in 2006 for Best Long-Form Work in English and the Spectrum Award also in 2006. Her second novel, *Burndive*, debuted at #7 on the Locus Bestseller List. Her books have been translated into French, Hebrew, and Japanese, and her short stories have appeared in anthologies edited by Julie Czerneda, Nalo Hopkinson, John Joseph Adams, and Ann VanderMeer. Her fantasy novel, *The Gaslight Dogs*, was published through Orbit Books USA.
